ISSN: 3048-8141 (Online)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15844442

Taiyō
An International, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Open Access e-Journal
www.taiyoejournal.com

Book Review: *Japan's Carnival War: Mass Culture on the Home Front, 1937–1945* by Benjamin Uchiyama, Cambridge University Press, 2019

RAJEEV K Aparna, Ph.D.
Graduate School of International Culture and Communication Studies (GSICCS),
Waseda University, Japan
aparnark@toki.waseda.jp

The iconography associated with most historical and cultural scholarship on war is that of deprivation. In the case of Japan, the Asia Pacific war years of the 1930s and 1940s are inextricably central to most accounts of its wartime cultural history. The late 1930s saw the rise of increased state activity with regard to national mobilization, control and censorship intended to boost ideologies of national sacrifice as the war dragged on into the next decade. Historical studies tend to lean into narratives of passive consumption of mass culture produced by the state towards the construction of a public sphere that aligned with the national interests of Japan at war. However, such narratives while successful at highlighting the influence of the ideological apparatuses employed by the Japanese wartime state, fail to account for the creative outlets that attest to and support studies on the role of popular agency and participation in wartime Japan. Scholarship fixated on state-sponsored social levelling and harmonization ignores the "social fractures and social 'unevenness' brought on by such levelling" (Uchiyama 2019, p.12).

Benjamin Uchiyama's *Japan's Carnival War: Mass Culture on the Home Front, 1937–1945* is positioned at this intersection of cultural history and mass culture, mapping "the evolution of mass culture into what [he] terms 'carnival war' in Japan" (p.3). The framework of carnival war that he extends brings together official and unofficial cultural practices that coexisted in a carnivalesque synergy during the years of 1937–1945. This framework further allows for an examination of the unevenness of state attempts at mobilizing society, the biases that informed and influenced state support and state censorship of cultural productions. The frameworks also allows a reading of the ways in which "Japanese people interacted with cultural practices that absorbed and deformed official ideologies" (p.3).

Through this framework, Uchiyama extends a rereading of the "total war" in Japan, beginning with Japan's invasion of China in 1937 and extending till the end of the war in 1945, noting that this was the period that saw the rise of distinctive war time characteristics that included mobilization and stringent state control. This in turn led to a reactionary push-back from society, triggering "the explosive third space of mass culture" (p.19) and the author argues that this mass culture became the site of a thriving carnival war.

Uchiyama borrows the idea of the 'carnival' from Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bhaktin who extended the idea of a transient moment, a volatile state of suspension where he normal rules of a community are overthrown in favour of cultural practices that "debase, mock and parody the strong while exalting the weak, ordinary, or grotesque as new "kings" of the community" (p.16). The volatility of the carnival is precisely due to its temporariness, contained and constrained it leads to implosive cultural practices that, while not strong enough to destroy the official order of things, can still shake things up. Leaning into this idea, Uchiyama creates a framework that can accommodate the dual identity of the Japanese people as "consumer-subjects" (p.14), going

ISSN: 3048-8141 (Online)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15844442

Taiyō
An International, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Open Access e-Journal
www.taiyoejournal.com

beyond simplistic characterizations of state mobilizations and resulting collaborations or resistances, to also include cultural practices that were actively produced and consumed by ordinary people within the mass culture of wartime Japan.

Uchiyama establishes five media-constructed carnival kings from 1937–1945, five cultural figures who were centrally located in narratives of the carnival war. These figures were crowned, albeit temporarily, as the kings and purveyors of carnival revelry. Each chapter of the book examines each of these figures, namely the reporter, the munitions worker, the soldier, the movie star, and the youth aviator.

The first wave of the carnival war was prompted by the extensive media coverage of the Shanghai-Nanjing campaign from August to December 1937, criticized by Japanese military and police officials as "a literal 'raucous carnival' (*omatsuri sawagi*) for undermining state-managed spiritual mobilization" (p.23). Uchiyama locates the young reporter, one who could deliver the "thrills (*suriru*)" of the battle front with "speed (*speedo*)", at the helm of this destabilizing riot of information that was simultaneously entertainment for the home front. The first chapter delves into the rise of the reporter and eventual transformation into "war correspondent" against the backdrop of a failing system of censorship. Through an analysis of the usage of the loan words "thrills (*suriru*)" and "speed (*speedo*)", the author delves into accounts of media reportage conducted by "'thrill hunters' seeking stories of increasing extremity" (p.38). He traces this carnivalesque reconfiguration of wartime cruelties into modern thrills as the beginning of a cultural space that would yield more media icons.

In the second chapter Uchiyama positions the "innovative, even improvisational, dimension of carnival war within total war mobilization – as a constantly shifting 'experience' as opposed to a rigid 'system' – by looking at the mass media fantasies of the munitions worker" (p.67). The author locates the munitions worker at the intersection of socio-economic transformations where he was simultaneously represented as patriotic "industrial warrior" and juvenile delinquent lavishly spending his undeserved pay. The chapter highlights the growth of the munitions worker, largely stimulated by the labour shortages created by the war, and the contradictory celebration and rejection of his social identity.

In the third chapter, Uchiyama turns his attention to the soldier, taking on the discussion of his role in the carnival war through an examination of his "transformation from celebrated godlike hero" during the initial years of the China War "to a humbler everyman who appealed to people's sympathies as the government tried to sustain popular support for protracted conflict with no end in sight" (p.106). This ties back to the first chapter where soldierly bravado was captured by the media reporter, conveying the picture of an agile youth patriotically rushing to his death. By late 1938, with the war slowing down, this was replaced by a picture of masculine fortitude, a stoic struggle through extreme hardships on the frontline for family and nation, highlighted through the author's analyses of popular war films of the time. This image was further reinforced through call backs to the Nanjing campaign, illustrated through an analysis of writer Nakayama Masao's 1939 book *Wakizaka butai (The Wakizaka Unit)*, "a dramatic account of the first unit to enter Nanjing" (p.118). The author claims that the book brought together the image of the superhuman hero of the media reports and the humanistic hero of the soldier films, triggering organized activity on the home front, most notably the collection and dispersal of comfort packages.

ISSN: 3048-8141 (Online)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15844442

Taiyō
An International, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Open Access e-Journal
www.taiyoejournal.com

According to the author then, the decrowning of the soldier was enacted in the awkward space that opened up between civilians and returned soldiers. These remnants of a glorious narrative were "viewed by the home front with a mixture of sympathy, gratitude, and suspicion" (p.139). They were caught in limbo, "as neither complete civilian nor a full-fledged soldier" (p.138). The author identifies the rage and the sorrow of the returned soldier through anecdotes from print media and police reports, before moving into analyses of literature that rose up in defence of the returned soldier.

Uchiyama strives to position each of these figures as a somewhat comical inversion of a more real "king" – "the affluent worker [who] inverted the persona of the middleclass salaryman" and the "returned soldier [who] emerged as the grotesque doppelganger to the heroic soldier" (p.22). Along that same vein of thought, he introduces the movie star who complicated wartime ideas of femininity. The author focuses here on the female movie star, depicting the heavily gendered take of Japan's family state ideology on the feminine subject and how in her own ways she managed embodying the desires and fantasies of Japanese consumer-subjects. The author retracts from producing a historical overview of Japanese wartime cinema or cinema culture, and focusses instead on the construction of the Japanese actress as "star" through detailed readings into the states attempts at mobilization of actresses and the roles they were expected to play, and the ways in which these attempts were resisted.

In his final chapter Uchiyama turns to what he calls "the final and most powerful king of the carnival war" (p.202) – the youth aviator. Positioned against the backdrop of rising aviation technology, and an increasing consumerist appetite for aviation and associated consumer cultures, he became the poster boy for an idea of consumption and glamour that was still within the acceptable limits of wartime austerity and the mobilization of war technology and violence. The chapter largely revolves around analyses of the dynamic and cosmopolitan aviation fan culture that fuelled consumerist desires pinned on the image of the youth aviator. Through an analysis of various media forms, the author traces the construction of the youth aviator as a figure that was perpetually young, often tied to a maternal figure, and imbued with a specific sartorial glamour.

This perpetual youth was culturally immortalized but decrowned by the carnival war when the youth aviator became the kamikaze pilot. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the two identities, Navy officials attempted to characterize the kamikaze pilot "as simultaneously childlike adolescent, a patriotic student, the model soldier, a military God and cheery boy-next-door" (p.245). However this was only further destabilized by the image of the jazz-loving kamikaze pilot who couldn't escape desire, an image constructed from poetry left behind by the pilots.

Uchiyama emphasizes the cultural resonance of the youth aviator as arising from his ability to balance being both a patriotic subject of the empire and a consumer of the mass culture within the total war system. The author reiterates the end of the carnival king-making as the kamikaze pilots heralded the beginning of the end of war, and the subsequent inevitable end of the carnival war as well. With America on the offensive, the Japanese mobilization system on the home front gave way and the carnival war collapsed.

The book's conclusion teases new directions of academic interest that the carnival opens up, including the ways in which the carnival war was gendered, how it operated within the gendered experience of soldiers and civilians experiencing the total war on the Japanese home front. The

ISSN: 3048-8141 (Online)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15844442

Taiyō
An International, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Open Access e-Journal
www.taiyoejournal.com

author goes on to situate the carnival war in Japan amidst global echoes of other carnivalesque confrontations with state mobilizations in other parts of the world.

Uchiyama establishes his argument through a very careful and compelling threading together of symbols gleaned from a diverse array of sources including text, images and films to construct a chronological movement of the carnival war. In his introductory chapter, the author articulates his positionality through references to existing scholarship on the cultural history of wartime Japan, providing a comprehensive idea of the academic backdrop that the book draws from. The introduction also covers key terms used within the book, including the origins, definitions and interpretations that the author works with in the context of the book's central persuasion. All of this lends to an engaging read; a puzzle of seemingly unconnected text and images that the author deftly puts into place to create a picture of the cultural fabric of the Japanese home front in the Asia Pacific war years.

However, while the author sustains his argument throughout, the exhaustive back and forth between the various sources he uses can at times be difficult to keep up with. Writing from a historical background, the author utilizes a combination of historical research and literary studies to fortify his argument. In doing so, he reaches into multiple media forms ranging from advertisements, posters, state pamphlets, reports, to literature and film as sources. While the connections he makes between these media are sometimes seamless, they are also sometimes difficult to catch. In isolating these particular motifs, the author seems to risk simplifying various media ecologies into the singular dimension of the carnival war and its associated production-consumption patterns.

In conclusion, *Japan's Carnival War* draws up a picture of mass culture in wartime Japan through exhaustive historical and archival analyses, and in doing so provides new perspectives to readers broadly interested in Japanese culture and history, or specifically interested in the cultural history of wartime Japan, and the positioning of mass culture and consumptions patterns in the crossfires of wars.

Bibliography:

- Uchiyama, Benjamin. 2019 . *Japan's Carnival War: Mass Culture on the Home Front, 1937 - 1945* . Cornwall: Cambridge University Press.